

# Sunday 3 June 2007: Trinity Sunday

## Talking about God

### Readings: Romans 5.1-5; John 16.12-15

I have a horror of clergy who are evasive in talking about God.

George Fox in the seventeenth century saw that the clergy of the established Church were well educated and had a degree from Oxford or Cambridge. He thought he could enquire of them in his search to know God, which was the most important and pressing search of his life. But they always seemed to tell him what is in the scriptures and what so and so said, usually from a long time ago. In his exasperation with these clergy, whom he dismissed as ‘steeple keepers’, Fox exclaimed, “But what canst *thou* say?” From your own experience, what can *you* say about God?

It is an understandable problem. None of us is going to find it easy to talk about God. There is a Biblical tradition of silence in the presence of God and reticence in speaking about God – which interestingly enough Fox’s successors, the Quakers, exemplify in the manner of their silent worship. Anything that speaks of God smoothly isn’t going to feel real or credible to us. Oddly enough, that’s one of the problems with the articulate atheism of Richard Dawkins and what he calls The God Delusion. He is altogether too certain for my taste as a Christian believer: ironically in his atheism there just isn’t enough room for ambiguity and doubt.

Like the clergy interrogated by George Fox, when I was a studying for a theology degree, I tried to understand what the Bible and the teachings of the Church had to say about God. As in today’s readings, you can find a Trinitarian theology in the Scriptures: Creator father, Human Son, and the eternal breath of God, the Holy Spirit, in Hebrew helpfully feminine.

I spent quite a long time trying to understand the Hebrew and Greek thoughts that lie behind the creeds formulated by the Church to sum up as accurately and unambiguously as possible what it is we can say about God, from our shared Judeo-Christian experience.

I’m not sure how much further this gets us because the creeds we say in church are intellectually so difficult to understand. I remember one of my teachers saying they might work best nowadays as sort of ‘football chants’, shared mantras that give the Christian group identity and that do at least focus on God as the centre of our worship and Church activity. I quite accept Bishop Tom Wright’s point in the quotation at the front of today’s service sheet that the creeds aren’t clever word games or mind games but to me they feel more like the guardians of orthodoxy and set church boundaries.

I don’t easily inhabit the world of the first five centuries of the Church so I have to work hard to make the creeds a lively statement about God. It helps to understand the controversies and disputes that lie behind them to realise they are based on experience and attempt to say what we can about God: Trinity and unity; Jesus fully human and fully divine; the Holy Spirit one and equal....

In our day, what we tend to pick out is the psychological realism of unity and diversity and the significance of relationships within the Divine person, just as Liz has done so well in the Newsletter front cover.

But all of this points to the fact that it is hard to speak coherently and systematically about God.

So full marks to Professor Oliver Davies from King's College London who spoke to the local clergy the other week about theology at King's and attempted in shorthand, and mostly fairly simple language, to talk about God and what he called 'Transformative Theology'. He said this is a new way of talking about God as encountered in Jesus Christ, taking the experience of what happened then without the pre-Copernican world view that goes hand in hand with Biblical and all theology through to the Middle Ages and which is no longer possible for the modern mind of the period since the Enlightenment.

Summarised in 30 minutes it was pretty dense stuff, had us wondering if he was really saying anything new, and caused the priest sitting next to me to mutter, "He needs to get out more often". I don't think that implied a lack of interest in God or Theology, only that for most of us, most of the time, we settle for much simpler and experiential language. We meet God in Jesus and the deep human encounters when time seems transcended and we glimpse the eternal. God is love, justice, mercy, truth.... In these things God is the creator and animating spirit of life.

One of the things that as a Church we should have learnt in 2000 years is that any talk about God is provisional. We can only do our best – intellectually rigorous, emotionally and experientially honest. We are not going to find complete unanimity in a form of words, a proposition about God. We will find our unity in a relationship with a God who meets us as *like* a person. We will find our unity in a shared action – the taking of bread and wine in memory of Jesus. We will find our unity in the spirit of love.

The Church has often been criticised as authoritarian and for its abuse of power. This in relation to doctrine is distasteful to us, and doesn't work, but they are very human failings, often rooted in insecurity and lack of confidence. The key to our unity, and to our being rooted in God, is in what we hope for.

In John's Gospel Jesus says that the Spirit of truth will lead us into all truth. That is the language of a journey and an adventure, of a developing relationship with the one we love, the beloved. On Trinity Sunday the question might be less about our intellectual ability and beliefs and more about what we set our hearts on and hope for in the God of love who is forever.